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READING DAMON GALGUT'S *THE PROMISE* AS A NEOMODERN NOVEL

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**Abstract:**

*Neomodernist novelists seek to recreate and rearrange the basic propositions and methods of modernism not to just to keep the modernist enterprise alive but also to expand its range of presentation and interpretation. The art of Neomodernist novelists falls in line with that of their predecessors in that it endeavours to analyse innermost emotions and state of things as they actually are using typically modernist procedures. In other words neomodernist novelists subject modernist principles of taste and style to a new process to analyse contemporary issues. The paper examines how Damon Galgut, in the novel under reference, employs typical modernist strategies to foreground the complications and complexities issuing from an Afrikaner family's inability to keep the promise of passing on a bequest to their Black servant, Salome. This by implication parallels the situation engendered by the policy of racial discrimination or segregation (apartheid) formerly practised in South Africa. It also analyses how the use of characteristic modernist techniques like narrative flexibility, which is easily perceptible through oscillating points of view, allows the author to present the characters from divergent perspectives. Finally the paper looks at how this panoptic narrative perspective lends meaning to the sequence of events.*

**Keywords:** *Neomodernism, Narration, History, Family, Politics, etc.*

Damon Galgut is a South African Novelist and playwright who started writing fiction when he was in his teens. His books *The Good Doctor* and *In a Strange Room* were shortlisted for the Booker Prize in 2003 and 2010 respectively, but he had to wait until 2021 to win this prestigious prize of his ninth novel entitled *The Promise*. His early novels, written in the 1980s, were based on divergent and somewhat apolitical themes. However, since the 1990s Galgut started engaging more explicitly with politics and his book *The Promise* is typically reflective of this thematic shift in his fiction.

Drawing from modernist fictional style Damon Galgut makes use of a unique narrative technique in his book *The Promise* (2021) to express his reaction to certain communal and political events which had far-reaching socio-ethnic implications in South Africa. His ingenuity is pretty clear from this technique which he carries forwards from some of his earlier works. What proceeds from this experimentation is a queer coalescence of divergent thoughts and attitudes. This is partly owing to the fact that the novel strenuously attempts to foreground a comprehensive and even-handed outlook which makes it difficult to strike a balance between



artistic and moral-ethical concerns. The novel however is not blunt or offensive nor does it ignore complications or complexities of the theme with which it deals. The analysis of certain instances of lack of justice or the violation of rights tends to become less virile owing to the extraneous influence of certain scruples which bear upon the interpretation of events in the form of the narrator. The novel opens in the mid-1980's amid the declaration of emergency in South Africa which was aimed at stifling intensive dissent. This declaration allowed law enforcing agencies to apprehend or restrain anyone to ensure what they perceived as public safety without the detainee having any right to appeal. Such racial and discrimination and segregation was characteristic of the official policy of apartheid practiced in the Republic of South Africa. The story revolves around a white family (Swarts) who have to their name a badly maintained farm situated in rural South Africa. The family is provided for by Herman Swart a fanatical racist and a neo-convert to religious belief who is unwilling to reconcile with any social or economic change. The book begins with the passing of Rachel, Hernam's wife, who has borne him three children, Anton, Astrid and Amor. The title of the book, *The Promise*, is highly suggestive and refers to Rachel's deathbed-declaration of bequeathing a house situated on the farm to Salome, the black servant of the family. The Swarts however renege on their promise refusing to hand down the bequest to her. This accounts for the moral bankruptcy and trust deficit which had come to define communal relationships in South Africa.

As far as its distinctive style is concerned *The Promise* is a neo-modernist novel in that it makes dexterous use of the modernist narrative and stylistic approaches. Describing the dynamics of neo-modernist fiction Monica Latham in her book *A Poetics of Postmodernism and Neomodernism* remarks:

Neomodernist texts are not concerned with any ludic relationship with the fictional predecessor in the way postmodernist texts are; they do not rely on close textual transformations but renegotiate, enhance and further the modernist literary heritage in general. It is not so much a matter of commenting on or laying bare the mechanisms of the original work, but of continuing the aura, that is to say the recognisable narrative tools and stylistic devices, of modernist literature. In short, in their neomodernist narratives, authors reanimate and reinvigorate the very methods and strategies their postmodernist counterparts sought to mimic and parody. (Latham, 130).

Besides this, *The Promise* is a neomodernist novel also because it appears to advocate the presence of a universal truth and clearly rejecting the postmodern position that the substance of that which exists depends on the perspective of the beholder. As one would expect, the author's intention as represented in his work is not irrelevant in neo-modernist scheme of things.

The narrative brings together ideas and styles from diverse sources. The adjustments which the author makes to expand the ideas in a discourse tend to inform the narrative in a typical neo-modernist style (Babb 3). In the process he seeks to represent the characterial cerebration in a manner which is true to life. The narrator speaks from a position which is not





clearly delineated in that the narration oscillates between different narrative points of view. At times the narration converges on specific characters, while at other times; it tends to become more objective. For the most part, however, it reads like a revelation of the flow of ideas and feelings of the characters which make it correspond to the stream of consciousness technique. Galgut is careful about maintaining the balance in the narrative particularly when he endeavours to describe the distinctive traits of the characters through their words and actions. A striking feature of Galgut's fiction is that most of his characters live through disconcerting feelings proceeding from the experience of human responsibility and freedom. They have to contend with inner conflicts to try to harmonise discordant feelings and ideas. Familial intricacies, which manifest themselves in a bitter strife with their kindred, pose insurmountable problems to them. Last but not the least, the prevalent political instability leads them to grapple with nagging theological questions. They constantly try to come to terms with this chaos so that they can endure the vicissitudes of life. Galgut's fiction is melancholic but, at the same time, realistic to the core.

As mentioned earlier, the story proceeds from the promise made by Rachel to Salome of giving the latter proprietary rights of the house in which she resides. The members of the family however struggle to reach an agreement on whether the promise should be upheld or not. The sequence of events in the novel however point to the country's cold, cruel and stormy past punctuated by events suggestive of the rampant discrimination, violence and dissent as well as the reconstructive attempts which were made to control the situation (Barris, 97). The novel analyses the dynamics of the coalescence history and collective identity of South Africa. Pertinently, as seen in the narrative, this identity manifests itself through beliefs, attitudes and sensitivities.

The Swart family, which is made up of differing character types, disintegrates as the members start breathing their last in a continuing series. The egotistical Astrid lacks fidelity to her spouse which leads her to betray him. Anton, on the other hand, has done some wrong while discharging his professional duty as soldier. This weighs heavily on his consciousness. Amor who is favourably inclined towards fulfilling the promise made to Salome is probably the most compassionate member of the family. The Swart family's indisposition towards upholding the promise was not the only problem. The passage of land to Salome had complicated legal implications as well.

What separates *The Promise* from Galgut's other fictional works is the clearly perceptible neo-modernist technique which he employs in the novel. The novel is seriously thoughtful and expresses profound personal emotions and observations. The uniqueness of the technique, as pointed out earlier, manifests itself in terms of the alternating narrative perspectives. Many expositions are meant clearly for the reader where he becomes the conspicuous recipient. At times, such a neo-modernist approach can make one feel alienated, disoriented or out of place. However, in the novel under reference, it has a different impact and accounts for the flexibility of the pervading narrative force impelling the reader to move with the story. This is what makes the novel so delightful and charming. The style and technique adopted by Galgut triggers, in the reader, a feeling of overwhelming admiration for his art. In line with the modernist approach he weaves together a story which interrogates the dynamics of political unrest while investigating moral imperfections which land his characters



in unpleasant situations. He does all this with the kind of dexterity which allows the reader to comprehend the motivations, perspectives and experiences of his characters so that he can identify with their emotional states. Monica Latham asserts:

By reproducing and reconfiguring the fundamental principles and techniques of modernism, the neomodernist practitioners of fiction have 'sustained the modernist project beyond its heyday of the 1920s and 1930s' (Bradford 5). They nod allegiance to modernism in the sense that they tend to represent inner moods and external reality with modernist tools, that is to say they make use of modernist aesthetic approaches and formal strategies which are reworked and carried forward to depict their present-day concerns (Latham, 129).

Galgut's degree of skill in handling opinions and attitudes is palpable throughout the narrative. He consistently establishes perspectival positions which differ diversely from other existing positions. The narrator understands everything about the characters and portrays their behavioural attributes with utmost precision. The narrative is put together with exemplary skill and presents an intense description of a family beset by seemingly insurmountable difficulties. At the same time the narrative foregrounds certain constraining national problems which impede restoration of order. Galgut dissects his characters engagingly in the style of influential modernists like Woolf and Joyce but at same time he has the ability to detach himself from their experiences and analyse them objectively. Modernist writers sought to find refuge in literature to circumvent the disillusionment issuing from the inconsistencies of politics and morality. However Galgut's *The Promise* compels one to believe that aesthetic has the power to redress the inconsistencies of history and politics. Nonetheless, what Galgut seems to suggest is that the effect of the socio-political turmoil analysed and reflected in his book is penetrant to the extent that it has debilitating psychological implications. Consequently such a perplexing political situation obviates the fulfillment of all personal commitments and promises. Galgut's fiction is reflective of his sensitive perception of the aesthetic qualities and values associable with the modernist novel. The technical as well as thematic similarity between some of the modern novels and *The Promise* is easily recognizable. Like some of the modern novels, this novel too is centred around a situation pertaining to the proprietorial and moral rights vis-à-vis the possession of a house. However, as pointed out above, what makes the novel quintessentially neo-modern is the use of typical modernist techniques like narrative versatility which manifests itself in terms of the shifting points of view. This allows the author to present the characters from differing perspectives and be critical of them. Such authorial judgment and interpretation helps the readers to understand and appreciate the characters better.

Galgut's narrative experimentation in *The Promise* is somewhat unrestrained. A generally solemn and melancholic narrative is enlivened by the distinctiveness of style through which characters and situations are examined from within and without. At other times one comes across narrative drifts which separate themselves from the principal course of the narrative to present the particulars of certain events and occurrences in a way which is contrary to what is expected, as demonstrated by the following lines:





Then Rachel is gone, truly gone. She came here as a pregnant bride twenty years ago and hasn't left since, but she will never walk back in through the front door again. In the hearse, I mean the house, a certain unspoken fear has ebbed, even if people aren't sure why and it's barely been said in words. Most of the time, in fact, it's words that deflect fear... (Galgut 18)

Galgut's narrator is versatile who's expression juxtaposes nuanced and straightforward tones which in turn facilitates the relative importance of situations. The narrator is all-knowing yet the narration is not plain or open and this is what makes the characters complex. Such narration makes the novel more appealing and interesting as it attracts attention to the narrator's recognition and expression of the peculiarities and incongruities inherent in different characters and situations. Having the characters perceive themselves critically with their own eyes as well as through the eyes of others situates them properly in the narrative. The author probably alludes to the fact that their very existence is subject to alteration as they are embroiled in an intricate and perplexing political situation which has the potential to obliterate their experiences. This narrative flexibility offers some relief in the face of seemingly inexorable and relentless gloom.

*The Promise* then is a book about the vicissitudes of history and the complexities of inheritance. The narrative beautifully represents ideas and principles through figures, situations and characters. For the author the impulsion for such writing seems to be both historical and personal and in this sense it aptly exemplifies literature born out of dissent and socio-political instability (Penfold 998). The property of the Swart family serves as symbol for disputed territory. This notion is put forward by the narrative through a dexterous and pronounced description of a series of related events. A White South African family has dwelt in a farmhouse for years on end but is kept by unavoidable circumstances from continuing to possess the property. The implication is that the family is simply not meant to be the rightful owner of the property. The only viable course of action for the Swart family seems to be expiation which they can achieve by washing their hands off the property. Overall the narrative takes a gloomy view and eventually the South African struggle seems to lose its way between divergent attitudes and positions. The dispensation is not upright enough to ensure that civic amenities are made available to people which leads to further despondency and distrust among them.

Although, Amor eventually decides to fulfill the promise made by her mother to Salome, her son Lukas, who happened to be Amor's childhood friend, is not just unappreciative but irate as well. Lukas is not able to reconcile with the Swart family's needless procrastination with respect to handing Salome the promised bequest:

My mother was supposed to get this house a long time back. Thirty years ago! Instead she got lies and promises. And you did nothing. Salome tries to shush him, but he keeps on. You lived off your family, you took their money, you didn't want to make a fuss. Now because all of them are dead, you come and give us a present. I saw you looking at it. Nice, nè? Three fucked-up rooms with a broken roof. And we must be grateful? (Galgut, 200)



To him the delay means that that the promise has fallen through notwithstanding Amor's proposal of making all possible amends. It is difficult to judge whether Amor's altruism and considerateness seems to have the potential to alleviate the misery of Salome's family or whether such generosity and accommodativeness, by implication offers an antidote to the national feelings of betrayal. However it is quite clear that in spite of the novel's narrative flexibility the state of Salome's cerebration seems to run into a siding. Salome's desires, opinions and sense of security regarding her expectations are principally and purposely ignored as Galgut endeavours to bring to light the fact that she is rendered speechless by the excesses of those who denied her a free and honourable life. In so doing, Galgut seems to assert that Salome's possible unwillingness to speak is more visible and persuasive than any argument could be but at the same time it is deeply demoralizing as well.

As a novelist Galgut pays strict attention to artistic procedure while his style is precise and impervious to anything inappropriate or extraneous. However what lends a subtle balance to his narratives is his ability to look at the brighter side of things. This distinctive ability often proves to be a pervasive influence which tends to change things compensatorily. As pointed out above, Galgut's narratives embody the force, substance and liveliness of the modernist novelists like Faulkner, Joyce and Woolf. Perhaps Galgut comes closest to the stylistic flamboyance of Faulkner. However in his animated presentation of the thoughts and feelings of his characters he bears a striking resemblance to Woolf's style. From Joyce he seems to borrow his preoccupation with the idea of death (Perry). The narrative covers the deaths of four members of the Swart family as well as the chaos and vexation that anteceded these deaths. The modernist elements are too visible in the narrative. What appeals the reader alongside its gravity and carefulness of thought is its gracefulness and sincerity of purpose. The novel juxtaposes humour and exactitude with insights which are indisputably true. However the novel has more to it; it makes you take a journey which not only offers significant insights into the otherwise obscure realities but is highly edifying as well. *The Promise* has often been compared to Forster's *Howards End* which like the former is also a book about a mishandled bequest and people in power who are obdurately uncompromising. What distinguishes the novel as an extraordinary work of neo-modernist fiction is the play between the interrelated sequence of events and an intensive and all-embracing perspective from which the story is told. All of this is held together by profound and overarching symbolism. The perspective traverses several consciousnesses to accommodate the natural as well as the supernatural as is evident from the following lines:

You get the idea. She touches down where her spirit was once thick, but she's no longer solid, a watercolour woman. In the crowd she is just another face, not much evident. She crosses large distances as if going from room to room, looking for something she's lost. In these appearances she wears different items of clothing from her wardrobe, an evening gown, a flimsy summer dress, even a shawl she bought on appro once from Truworths and took back the next day. She looks real, which is to say, ordinary. How would you know she is a ghost? Many of the living are vague and adrift too, it's not a failing unique to the departed (Galgut, 38).





The flexible narrative voice offers insights into the cerebration of a host of characters which include the ones who suffer as well as the ones who are responsible for their suffering. It dexterously copes with variable circumstances and situations. In its various conspicuous movements the voice is incisive, disproportionately earnest and intensely personal. At other times you find it to be expatiative, flip-flopping or self-correcting. The voice reaches out to the reader candidly perceiving him to be white South African who is made to feel that he is an unwilling participant in the impulsive discrimination and prejudice of the Swarts. On the other hand, as mentioned before, absence of Salome's voice is reflective of the parochialism associable with racial discrimination. Galgut's perception of the intricacies and inconsistencies of life is unique. He also seems to be considerably conversant with alterability of human consciousness. These perceptual skills account for the versatility in the narration and also for a providing a faithful picture of moral wrongs committed by the Afrikaners and their deleterious implications.

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